DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 497 CS 211 463

AUTHOR Bogdan, Deanne
TITLE Censorship and Selection in Literature Teaching: Personal Reconstruction or Aesthetic Appreciation?
PUB DATE Aug 88
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Censorship; Critical Reading; *Educational Philosophy; English Curriculum; Epistemology; Foreign Countries; *Literature; Literature Appreciation; *Reader Response; *Reader Text Relationship; Secondary Education; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Aesthetic Reading; Canada; Interactive Reading; Literary Theory

ABSTRACT

The choice between the fusion of literature and life and a pedagogy of engagement, on the one hand, and the separation of literature and life and a pedagogy of detachment, on the other, is a painful one. Philosopher of education James Gribble would rather risk some form of aestheticism than allow that a great work of literature could be viewed in such a way that it (or what it 'presents') could legitimately be rejected in the light of a moral code. "Literary literacy" encompasses both engagement and detachment, both the feeling of coming to know certain "truths" about oneself and/or the world, and getting distance on that feeling. The acquisition of literary literacy would enable students to read literature as assertion, as a form of knowing, and as hypothesis, as a form of questioning. Awareness of the political context of the engaged reader is a first step in respecting each other's imaginative and psychological identities. Now that engagement with the text has been established as a fact of reading life, learning to stand outside engagement may be one of the basics students move ahead to. A definition of literary literacy encompassing the goals of transformation and enculturation by way of a pedagogy of engagement and detachment might help keep those odds even. In actual censorship cases, educators should maintain consistency and acknowledge their own political investment in the literature curriculum. (RAE)

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ED298497

CENSORSHIP and SELECTION in LITERATURE TEACHING: PERSONAL RECONSTRUCTION or AESTHETIC APPRECIATION?

A paper for

c ETHICS IN EDUCATION

(in press)

by Deanne Bogdan
Department of History and Philosophy
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

August, 1988

CS211463

Ever since Plato banished the poets from his Republic, arguments against censorship have had to counter his central epistemological claim, that is, if poetry (I use this term generically, as interchangeable with "literature") influences for good, it can also do so for ill. It is the same claim that apologists for the educational value of literature have had to refute. In the history of Anglo-American letters, every defender of literature as a vehicle for moral values — from Sir Philip Sidney in the Renaissance, to Percy Shelley and Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth century, to T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and Northrop Frye in the twentieth — has had to confront the basic philosophical question of why and how the power of literary art is a good thing, but not a bad thing. As regards the current crisis of literature education, in which literature is being pushed out of the curriculum, from one end, because it is not deemed as "relevant" to the acquisition of basic literacy as other, more "useful," aspects of English studies; and, from the other, by the rise of both overt and covert censorship in the schools, educators at every level — Ministries of Education, school boards, principals, and English teachers alike — are having to face the consequences in the community of the absence of any consistent philosophy of literature education. This paper is an attempt to inquire into the implications for the school text censorship debate of certain prevailing assumptions underlying the teaching of literature; its main premise is that rationales for the educational value of literature are on a collision course with rationales against censorship. In order that those who frame these rationales not speak out of both sides of their mouth, it is important to clarify the grounds of literature as a moral educator.

Over the past decade or more, the profile of literature education in Canada, the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, has changed from an emphasis on literary appreciation of an accepted literary canon, from the study

of "literary masterpieces," to what has come to be called the "personal growth" or "reader response" model, which stresses enjoyment and the potential for self-actualization by way of literature's acknowledged power to name. This literary naming has long been the cornerstone of traditional liberal humanist philosophies of literature education, which in the past could presume the existence and transmission of a more or less constant, if not monolithic, cultural literary heritage. Within such a framework, the notion of "literary literacy" was based on the compatibility between the political aim of enculturation and the personal one of transformation.

Today, however, the power of literature to name, within an educational context, has emerged more and more perceptibly as a double-edged sword, both politically and pedagogically. Politically, revisions in curriculum guidelines have adopted an affirmative action policy towards what is to be named; pedagogically, the reader response, personal growth, or what I will refer to as the "engagement model" of literary education, has dictated how it is to be named. The result has been a bifurcation between enculturation and transformation. I will argue that a blindness to this split has become a veritable spawning ground for the increasing difficulty in resolving censorship disputes.

What is to be taught has been changing as fast as how it is to be taught. Rationales for the teaching of literature have had to keep pace with demands for its social relevance in an increasingly pluralistic society. At the same time, personal response, or the "engagement model," has replaced literary analysis or the "detachment model," as the major methodological approach, creating a veritable time-bomb for censorship in the classroom, where one student's self-realization is bound, sooner or later, in a culture as diverse as ours, to become

another's self-alienation. To wit, the recent case of a Toronto secondary school with a large population of blacks, where a group of black students petitioned the removal of Golding's Lord of the Flies from the curriculum on the grounds that a single line referring to blacks pejoratively was sufficient cause for its excision. After an agonizing battle that polarized the English Department, most of whom, I suspect, were educated within a pedagogy of detachment, where literary context is greatly valued as a criterion for judging whether a book is racist, the decision was taken to comply with the students' request. I suggest that, in this instance, removing the book was more consistent with the present aims of literature education than retaining it would have been.

I will speculate that the principles underpinning the decision to jettison Lord of the Flies in the above example are consonant with those of the reigning pedagogy of engagement, together with an affirmative action text selection policy. By affirmative action curriculum policy, I mean moves by policy-makers to bring the literature curriculum into line with specific political ends, that is, to enculturate students by raising consciousness about issues such as ethnic diversity, the changing role and status of women, and, in Canada, particularly, the importance of national uniqueness in a culture that has been until very recently swamped by British and American colonization of its imaginative identity. Within such a policy, the power of literary naming is regarded as unproblematic, and is understood primarily within a conception of literature as a reflection of "life."

Curriculum guidelines tend to be contemporary applications of Matthew Arnold's dictum that literature as a civilizing force is the repository of the best that has been thought and said. In Arnold's formulation, universal values, such as justice and tolerance, are thought to radiate more or less automatically from

"timeless" literary works. But, today, guidelines for teaching literature stress more culturally specific values emanating from literary texts. In the most recent Ontario document, for example, the "centrality" of literature to the curriculum is argued strictly on the basis of its "power" as "an inspiring record of what men and women have enjoyed or endured, have done, and have dreamed of doing" (p. 2, emphasis added). These powerful pictures of the world, with which students engage in the reading process, are deemed to instill in those students certain values which I can only describe as being "politically correct," values such as respect for multiculturalism, pluralism, Canadian identity, and an altered vision of "women's place." Articulations of these values are laced rhetorically throughout policy statements, and while course content is not explicitly prescribed, it is assumed that "the inspiring record" of human achievement literature is thought to portray should be tailored to societal norms which are reflected back to students in a curriculum designed to supplement, indeed to supplant, an outmoded literary content with a revisionist one. Thus the approved social ethos is reinforced by infusing the curriculum with new and different literary pictures of the world.

It is naive to suppose that there should be no conflict over these "old" and "new" pictures of the world. In the first place, there just isn't room to teach everything. At a theoretical level, one can easily espouse the ideal of an ever-widening canon that would include more and more minority literature, but this pluralist view blankets over the practical problem of having to choose one book over another. The logic of inclusion and exclusion has consequences for those who are mandated to design curriculum (see Moffett, 1988, p. 205). If the group of students in the example I have cited had presented their position by arguing for the inclusion of a book more sympathetic to the position of blacks than

Golding's novel rather than by requesting its removal, the issue may have escaped the censorship label, but it would not have avoided the inevitable truth that the very existence of a particular curriculum is invested with a certain social and political authority. In the school text censorship debate, this makes the line between justification and censorship, enculturation and inculcation, very fine indeed.

So much for the what of literature curriculum as it is generally conceptualized. Now for the how. I want to argue that the current romanticizing of the engagement pedagogical model tacitly conspires with the indoctrinative tendencies of a "reflectionist" view of the relationship between literature and life currently in the ascendent as the basis of text selection criteria, and that, together, they hoist literature educators on their own humanist petard in the censorship debate. Both the notions of literature as "an inspiring record" of human achievement and "engagement with the text" espouse the hope and promise of literature as the embodiment of values to be communicated to the reader. In our investigation of the assumptions underlying what literature is taught, we saw that enculturation is a primary goal of literature education, and that the authority of a curriculum guideline controls the value dimension of literature education to the extent that it attempts to adapt the literature curriculum to changing cultural norms. That literature influences, and influences powerfully, is the very reason that what is read matters within an educational context. Otherwise, there would never be felt the need to change the curriculum. Thus, the literary communication model described above does not presuppose that the educational value of literature is timeless or self-evident, irrespective of its content; rather, it assumes that literature does and should influence in specific

directions. Yet the rhetoric of curriculum guidelines would persuade us that the "power" of literature is intrinsically and innocently empowering to the student. One of the reasons for this belief constitutes a basic premise of the "engagement model": literary experience is a form of "real" experience, the beneficial educational effects of which is unquestioned. Like the notion of the civilizing "power" of literature, the notion of engagement, involvement, absorption, of "getting lost" in a text, of inhabiting fictional worlds and identifying with fictional characters sympathetically, has long been valorized as one of the major premises of literature's educational value. "Power " and "identification" have been the givens of the moral value of literature. Within a literary communication model, engagement with the text implies that the reader resonates with verbal facsimiles of reality experienced as the feeling of coming to know certain "truths" about ourselves and the world. In this context, Shelley's dictum that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" seems unassailable.

The demise of literary analysis in literature education and its replacement by personal response through class discussion and journal writing has key implications for the justification/censorship issue, especially from a developmental perspective. Instead of imbibing teacher-formulated prepackaged interpretation or "dissecting" literature, students are encouraged to trust their own intuition about literary meaning. This transition from a pedagogy of detachment to engagement is directly related to the educational imperatives of psychic development, attitude formation, and identity building through vicarious literary experience. The advent of "reader-power" (Belsey, 1980, pp. 29 ff.) in the schools has recognized the importance of affording students the opportunity to "relate" to fictionalized literary representation as a way of consolidating their emergent and often fragile

self-concepts. Witness the adolescent fiction industry, dedicated to just this endeavour. Thus literary education has taken on the mantle, awesome in its implications, of being responsible for powerful self-transformations in student readers. One of the reasons why the censorship issue is so thorny at present is that literature education has finally come into its own; the engagement model is actually succeeding in unleashing the subversive element in sympathetic identification — psychic change. But the trajectory of such change is highly unpredictable. Not surprisingly, then, some students and parents may find that being a mental traveller (Frye, 1963, p. 263) through strong literary works can be threatening. It has ever been thus, but in the past a pedagogy of detachment based on literary criticism, i.e., the study of literature, has functioned as a container for the often discomfiting effects of imaginative identity. Without that container, students are either left on their own to do private battle with the underside of engagement, or are corralled into a sanitized curriculum expunged of any trace of human encounter.

Most literature educators do not readily acknowledge that engagement and identification cut both ways: they can be alienating as well as uplifting. Why is it that the line of argument in refutation of a request to remove a book known to have induced alienating effects switches gears in midstream from an engagement model to a detachment model? That is, the most widely used strategy to retain an indicted book on the curriculum is the appeal to literary context: plaintives are told to read the entire work, to interpret allegorically and figuratively rather than literally, to respect the author's intentions, invoke aesthetic distance, reflect on fine discriminations between fictional characterizations and "real people," and not to extrapolate from the particular to

the universal. In short, they are enjoined to maintain the distinction between literature and life, even as those who would refute them tend to collapse that distinction when lobbying for their own literary content and the values it is thought to propound. Political expediency, then, tends to govern how literature is rationalized into and out of the curriculum. Whatever the motivation and ramifications of the Toronto high school's English department's decision to remove Lord of the Flies on the basis of a student deposition, one thing is clear — they, teachers knew they couldn't have it both ways: to take seriously literature's transformational function in empowering students to think for themselves, to be responsible for their own learning, and at the same time deny them access to the very educational process in which they purport to participate.

In reflecting upon the implications of the above analysis for adjudicating actual censorship cases, I will suggest only that both in drafting rationales for teaching literature and against the censorship of particular literary works, educators maintain consistency and acknowledge their own political investment in the literature curriculum. In keeping to a pedagogy of engagement on the basis of literature as a vehicle for the direct transmission of values, educators must be prepared for conflicts that will inevitably sacrifice someone's imaginative heaven on the altar of someone else's imaginative hell. To supplement a pedagogy of engagement with that of detachment will not solve the censorship dilemma, but it will provide a conceptual framework for literary experience. By advocating a pedagogy of detachment, I do not necessarily intend a return to formal analysis. Rather, I see literature study as education for critical consciousness by way of a host of methods that would include locating literary works in their historical context, inquiring into the constructed nature of literary language, as well as

developing strategies that allow students to scrutinize the conditions — personal, moral, aesthetics, social, and political — of their own responses.

The danger in supplanting a pedagogy of engagement with that of detachment is the aestheticization or reification of literature that comes with keeping literature separate from life. Once literary experience is partitioned off from "real" experience, the educational value of the personal growth model may be weakened. The choice between the fusion of literature and life and a pedagogy of engagement, on the one hand, and the separation of literature and life and a pedagogy of detachment, on the other, is a painful one. Philosopher of education James Gribble (1983) opts for the latter. He would rather risk "some form of aestheticism . . .than. . .allow that a great work of literature,. . .could be viewed in such a way that it (or what it 'presents') could legitimately be rejected in the light of a moral code" (p. 155).

I am not content with an either/or solution to the problem. "Literary literacy" encompasses both engagement and detachment, both the feeling of coming to know certain "truths" about oneself and/or the world, and getting distance on that feeling. The acquisition of literary literacy would enable students to read literature as assertion, as a form of knowing, and as hypothesis, as a form of questioning. I do not claim even the attainment of such a goal as a panacea in the censorship issue. But awareness of the political context of the engaged reader is a first step in respecting each other's imaginative and psychological identities. Now that engagement with the text has been established as a fact of reading life, learning to stand outside engagement may be one of the basics students move ahead to. If cultural literacy is to mean more than just a shared body of thought binding a society together, (see Hirsch, 1987), if it is to

be truly emancipatory, it must acknowledge patterns of dominance and control of the culture. Within those patterns, justification and censorship become two sides of a coin flipped all too often in favour of privilege. A definition of literary literacy encompassing the goals of transformation and enculturation by way of a pedagogy of engagement and detachment might help keep the odds even.

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